



California Community Colleges

Statewide College Attendance Survey

Fall 2023

In partnership with



TheRPGroup

Research, Planning & Professional Development
for California Community Colleges

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Executive Summary

The California Community Colleges (CCC) College Attendance Survey was designed to understand the factors influencing prospective and previously enrolled community college students' decisions to attend a California community college in fall 2023. This report provides a summary of the second administration of this survey that took place in late summer/early fall 2023 and included responses from 117 CCC by 29,463 previously enrolled and new/prospective (as of fall 2023) students.

Results from the 2023 survey revealed similar findings from the survey administered in 2022 in terms of what influences their decisions to attend college and/or stay enrolled in their classes:

- the need to balance and juggle multiple responsibilities
- mental health factors
- the cost of education
 - Nearly half of students who indicated they did not think they could afford college shared that they were planning to have paid for college via their own money

Based on these findings, we reiterate the three areas of opportunities identified in the 2022 survey:

- **Re-emphasize the value proposition for college more explicitly,**
- **Increase student-centered course and student support services schedules and modalities, and**
- **Raise awareness and increase the utilization of state investments to support students' learning and basic needs.**

To highlight the need to further focus on college affordability, we add the following opportunity:

- **Expand communication and assistance campaigns about the different types of financial resources and aids available to students to help offset the costs of education.**
 - Examples include the proposed student-centered framework for Cal Grant, Assembly Bill (AB) 607: Course Materials, and Zero-Textbook Degree Cost Program.

While these and similar efforts are directly addressing college affordability in different ways, it will be incumbent upon the colleges to ensure that faculty, staff, and students are aware of these efforts to help raise awareness and, more importantly, access to these resources and services to help make college more affordable for students.

Introduction

The California Community Colleges (CCC) College Attendance Survey was designed to understand the factors influencing prospective and previously enrolled community college students' decisions to attend a California community college in fall of 2023. This report summarizes the second administration of this survey in late summer/early fall 2023 and includes responses from 117 institutions, including 115 community colleges and two continuing education institutions, by 29,463 previously enrolled and new/prospective (as of fall 2023) students. The 42-item survey included a mix of fixed-choice and open-ended items to understand what influenced students' decisions to attend college in fall 2023 and items focused on reasons affecting the decision to enroll in fall 2023, prior college experiences, and perceived value of education. The survey link was distributed to students with assistance from the institutional research offices at each college.

Report Overview

The report is organized as follows by sections in the survey:

- Section 1 describes the sample characteristics.
- Section 2 describes students' fall 2023 enrollment plans.
- Section 3 describes the factors influencing students' decisions to attend a community college.
- Section 4 complements Section 3 by providing survey respondents' perceived value of a college education and, among previously enrolled students, their perceptions of the campus climate at their college.
- Section 5 summarizes what students indicated they needed from their colleges to pursue their educational goals.
- The final section summarizes the survey's key findings and opportunities for consideration.

For information about the survey methodology, survey instrument, and aggregated data tables summarizing each survey item, please refer to Appendices A, B, and C, respectively.

Section 1: Sample Characteristics

Survey Respondents

The survey had 29,463¹ student respondents, with at least one respondent from each of the 117 institutions. In comparison to all students enrolled in fall 2022, the survey sample was relatively representative sample of CCC students by ethnicity and gender (Table 1). The racial/ethnic demographics of survey respondents paralleled those of students across the system; however, there were slightly larger percentages of African American/Black, American Indian/Alaska Native, Asian/Filipino, and Pacific Islander students in the sample compared with their statewide proportions.

¹ The survey had 38,888 raw responses and after completing data validation and cleanup, the survey sample dropped to 29,463 valid responses. For information about the data validation and cleanup procedures please see [Survey Clean Up Process.docx](#)

The survey sample comprises a smaller proportion of students age 25 and younger, and about 20% have at least one type of disability. The percentage of female students was considerably larger in the survey sample compared with what is typically observed statewide. Most respondents (74%) are pursuing a degree, certificate, or transfer as their educational goal.

Table 1. Student Demographics: Fall 2023 Survey Respondents vs. Fall 2022 Statewide

Demographics	Percentage of Fall 2023 Survey Respondents (n = 29,463)	Percentage of Fall 2022 Statewide ^a (N = 1,292,345)
Ethnicity		
African American/Black	7	5
American Indian/Native Alaskan	1	<1
Asian/Filipino	16	13
Hispanic	46	50
Pacific Islander	1	<1
Two or More Races	5	4
White	20	23
Not reported/unknown	5	5
Gender		
Female	66	54
Male	29	44
Nonbinary	3	<1
Not reported/unknown	2	2
Under 25 years of age	43	60
Veteran	4	2
With dependents	20	*
With a disability	22	5
Seeking degree/certificate/transfer	74	*

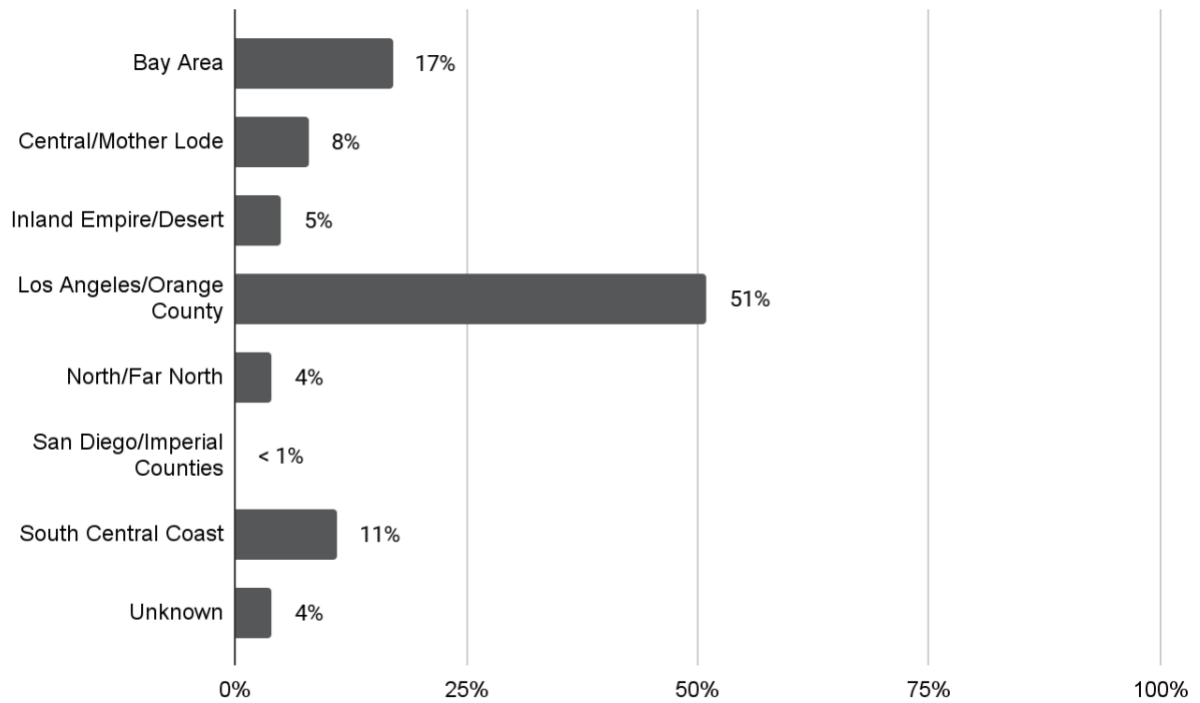
Notes: ^a CCCCCO Data Mart - Student Headcount data for Fall 2022 retrieved on January 3, 2024.

* Comparable data not available in CCCCCO Data Mart.

Students' College by Region

Respondents were mostly from colleges in the Los Angeles/Orange County region (51%), with the fewest respondents from colleges in the North/Far North counties (4%) (Figure 1). The number of responses by individual colleges ranged from one to 3,645.

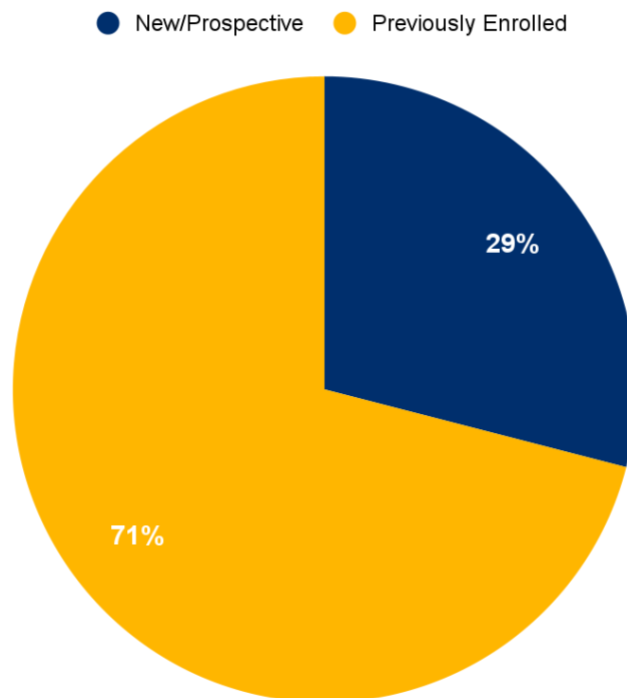
Figure 1. Percentage of Respondents by CCC Region



Section 2: Fall 2023 Enrollment Plans

The survey included new/prospective (students who had not previously enrolled at a CCC before fall 2023) and previously enrolled students (students who had enrolled in a CCC before fall 2022) with the majority of respondents being the latter (71%) (Figure 2).

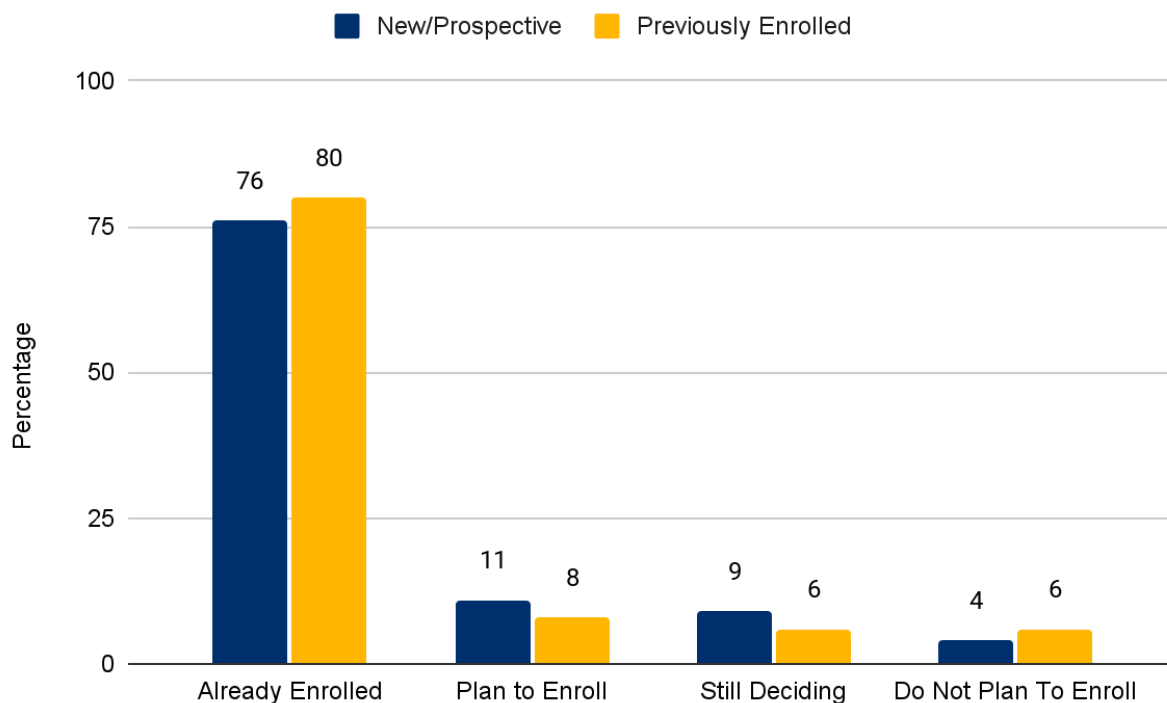
Figure 2. Attendance Status



When asked about their enrollment plans for fall 2023, the majority (79%) of respondents indicated they had already enrolled in courses at a California community college for fall 2023. An additional 9% indicated they planned to attend. Smaller percentages of students were still deciding (7%) or said they did not plan to attend college (5%) in fall 2023.

When disaggregated by attendance status (Figure 3), a slightly larger percentage of previously enrolled students indicated they had already enrolled in fall 2023 (80%) compared with those who were new/prospective students (76%), providing a potential upshot of colleges' retention and persistence efforts in the past year to support continuing students through the completion of their program pathway.

Figure 3. Fall 2023 Enrollment Plans by Attendance Status



Regarding unit load, the majority of new/prospective students reported they planned to enroll in 12 or more units (58%) while only 42% of previously enrolled students indicated they planned to enroll in 12 or more units in fall 2023. Few new/prospective and previously enrolled students (~6-7%) indicated enrolling in noncredit classes only.

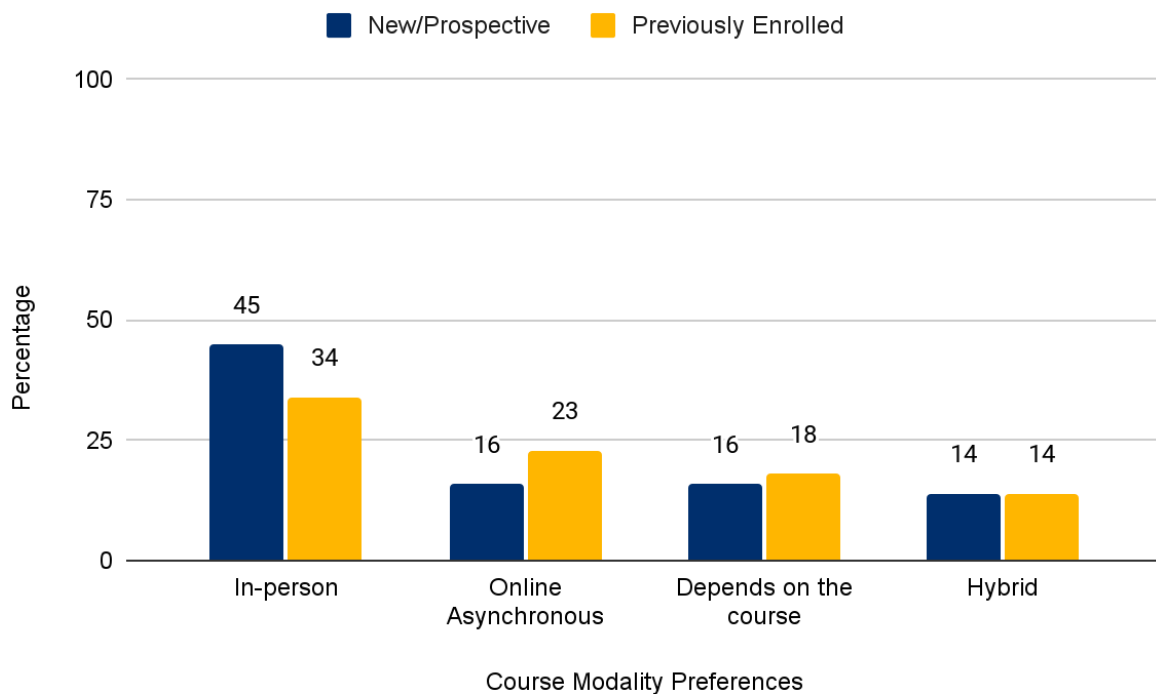
Most students (74%) reported that they were not taking classes at any other college or university, suggesting they are opting to attend only one institution in fall 2023 to meet their course-taking needs.

Section 3: Factors Affecting Enrollment Decisions

Comparison of Reasons from Prospective vs. Previously Enrolled Students

A new survey question was added asking respondents' course modality preferences and revealed a comparable split between in-person and online preferences overall but some differences between new/prospective and previously enrolled students (see Figure 4). A larger proportion of new/prospective students indicated they preferred in-person courses compared to previously enrolled students (45% vs. 34%, respectively), with a slightly larger proportion of previously enrolled students preferring online (asynchronous or synchronous) than new/prospective students (37% vs. 30%, respectively).

Figure 4. Course Modality Preferences by Attendance Status



Respondents were asked to choose from a list of potential reasons which ones were influencing their decisions to attend or re-enroll at the college. The top reason for both prospective and previously enrolled respondents was related to concerns about balancing multiple competing demands at the same time (see Figures 5a and 5b), with about a quarter of both new/prospective and previously enrolled students marking this reason. The next most common reason given was not feeling they could afford college (excluding reasons related to completing educational goals for previously enrolled students).

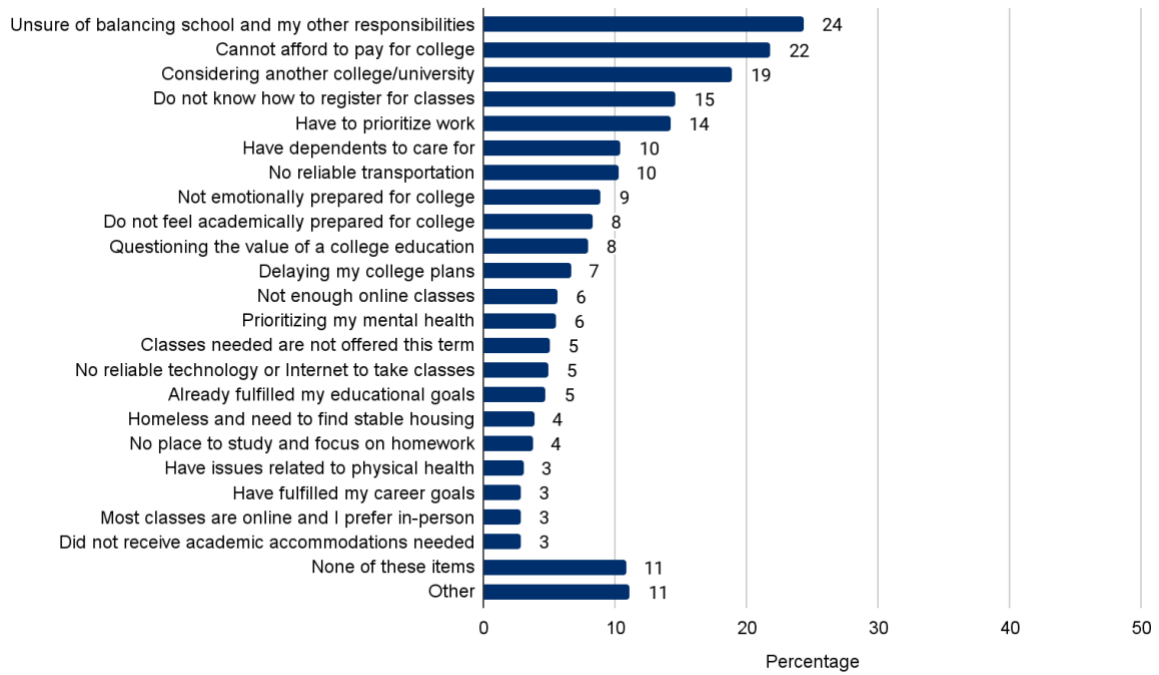
The top three reasons affecting **new/prospective** students' decision whether to attend were:

- Unsure of balancing school and other responsibilities (24%)
- Cannot afford to pay for college (22%)
- Considering another college or university (19%)

A quarter of the previously enrolled students who responded to the survey had already completed a degree or certificate, with 20% indicating they had transferred and are now attending a university. Excluding completion and transfer reasons, the top three reasons affecting **previously enrolled** students' decision whether to re-enroll were:

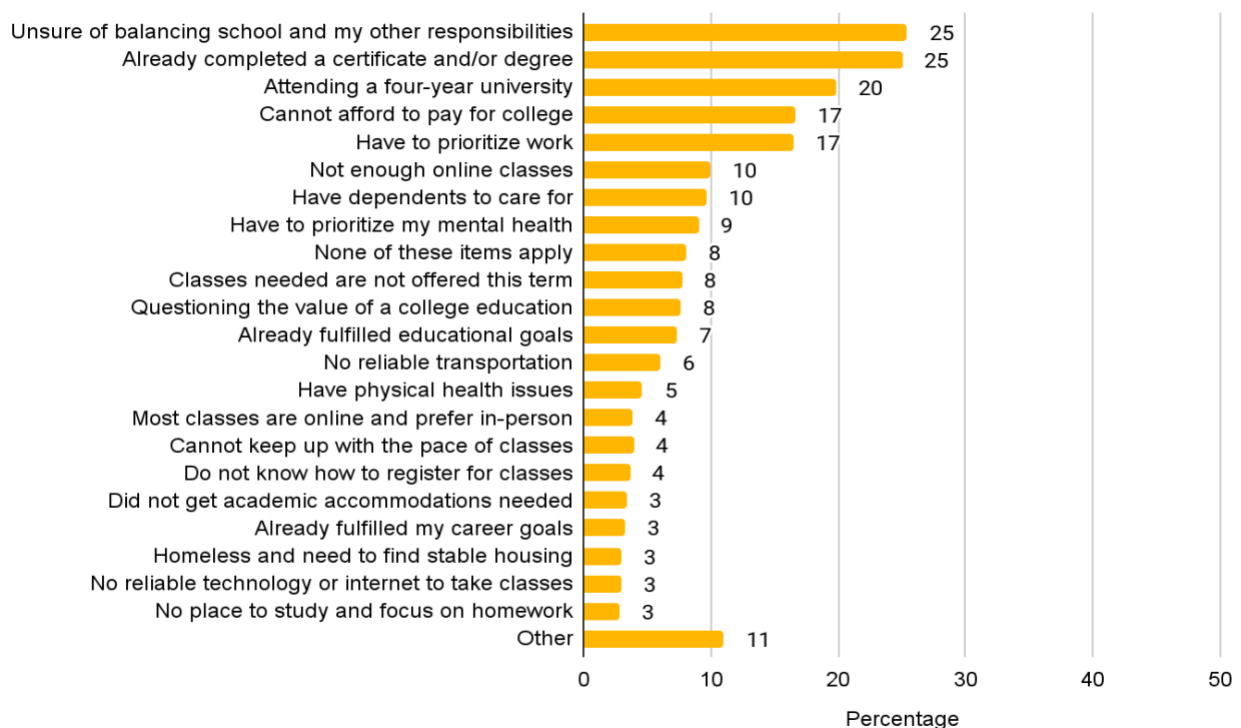
- Unsure of balancing school and my other responsibilities (25%)
- Cannot afford to pay for college (17%)
- Have to prioritize work (17%)

Figure 5a. Top Reasons Affecting New/Prospective Students' Decisions Whether to Attend



Note: Respondents were able to check more than one reason.

Figure 5b. Top Reasons Affecting Previously Enrolled Students' Decisions Whether to Attend



Note: Respondents were able to check more than one reason.

Similar to the survey findings from the prior year,² both new/prospective and previously enrolled students are grappling with increasing demands to balance school and life responsibilities that seem to be related to the need to work and/or care for dependents. In the words of two previously enrolled students:

I need to prioritize work and making money to support my household. I am unable to attend full time. I have children and need to support them as well.

The main factor is juggling schoolwork with my job. Things have been super difficult and hard lately. When I seem to focus too much on school, I end up behind with my bills and responsibilities outside of school.

Students reported challenges in being able to successfully balance school-life responsibilities. Many students are juggling work commitments and parental responsibilities while attending college. Concerns primarily centered around time constraints, scheduling conflicts, and the fear of being unable to keep up with coursework. Family-related factors, such as having a newborn baby, managing childcare responsibilities, and being a single parent, also played a significant role in students' decision to attend/re-enroll. Two new/prospective students shared:

² [Statewide College Attendance Survey, Fall 2022](#)

I'm a single parent. I work full time to provide my living. I can't take 12 units at a time.

I'm not making enough money to pay for my rent and I am having to work multiple jobs to keep up with the living costs. I want to enroll I just don't know if I can see it through and if I am able to work at my own pace and stay motivated to keep moving forward.

Lack of funds and concerns about the cost of education were recurring themes. Affordability issues and difficulties paying for living expenses, while covering college fees, textbook costs, and other related expenses were mentioned frequently. It is important to note, education costs extend beyond tuition, textbooks, and course materials. Many students reported financial hardships, including challenges in securing financial aid and difficulty meeting basic needs while attending college. Notably, students reported struggling with being able to afford their living expenses and meeting their housing, food, and transportation costs while attending college. Financial struggles due to job loss and homelessness were cited frequently. In the words of two previously enrolled students:

Money. I really want to go back to school to finish my education but unfortunately, I can't afford to be in school and work to stabilize myself and help support my family.

I'm having a hard time paying my rent and bills and need to work two jobs.

Many students emphasized the need for more financial aid, specifically grants and scholarships. Students expressed uncertainty about available resources and suggested that the college should provide more guidance on financial aid options, scholarship opportunities, and the application process in general. There was a recurring call for increased financial aid availability and a simpler application process.

Students expressed concerns about having to maintain a full-time job while attending college, reflecting on the difficulty of managing work demands and college courses simultaneously. Students cited numerous work-related reasons, such as busy schedules, exhausting shifts, working multiple jobs, and the inability to take time off. Other factors included having an irregular work schedule, taking on an increased number of work hours, and experiencing a job change or promotion. As one new/prospective student and two previously enrolled students explained:

I have to put my work first before deciding to go back to college at this point because I am the only person sustaining myself financially.

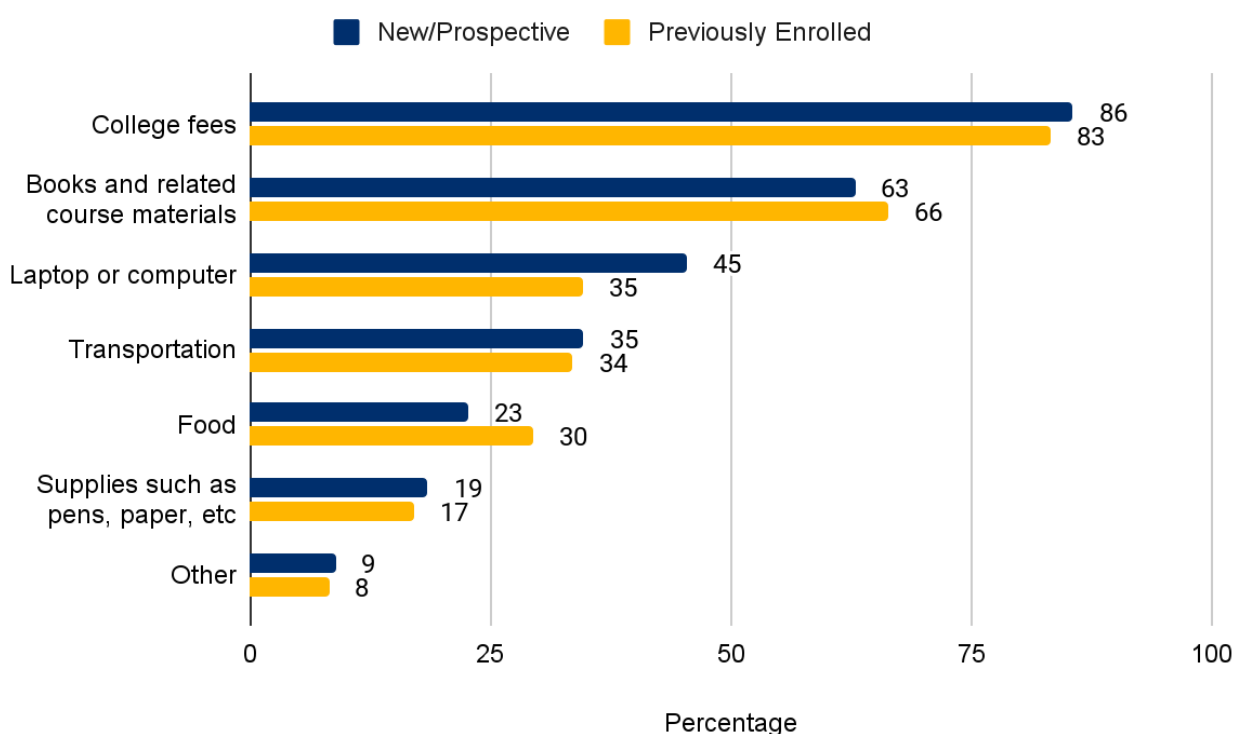
I need to prioritize work and making money to support my household. I am unable to attend full time. I have children and need to support them as well.

My main issue is work. I have to work full time, it is hard to find the balance to give school the time and effort needed.

College Affordability

Additional items were added to the survey to dig deeper into college affordability. Among respondents who indicated they could not afford college at this time (1,009 students³), follow-up survey items asked what makes college unaffordable and how they planned or previously paid for their education. Of all the types of possible costs, most students marked college fees (over 80% of all respondents), followed by books and related course materials (see Figure 6). Cost concern types were similar between new/prospective and previously enrolled students, with some notable differences related to laptop and computer costs and food. A larger proportion of new/prospective students marked laptop and computer costs than previously enrolled students (45% vs. 35%).

Figure 6. Costs Making College Unaffordable for Students

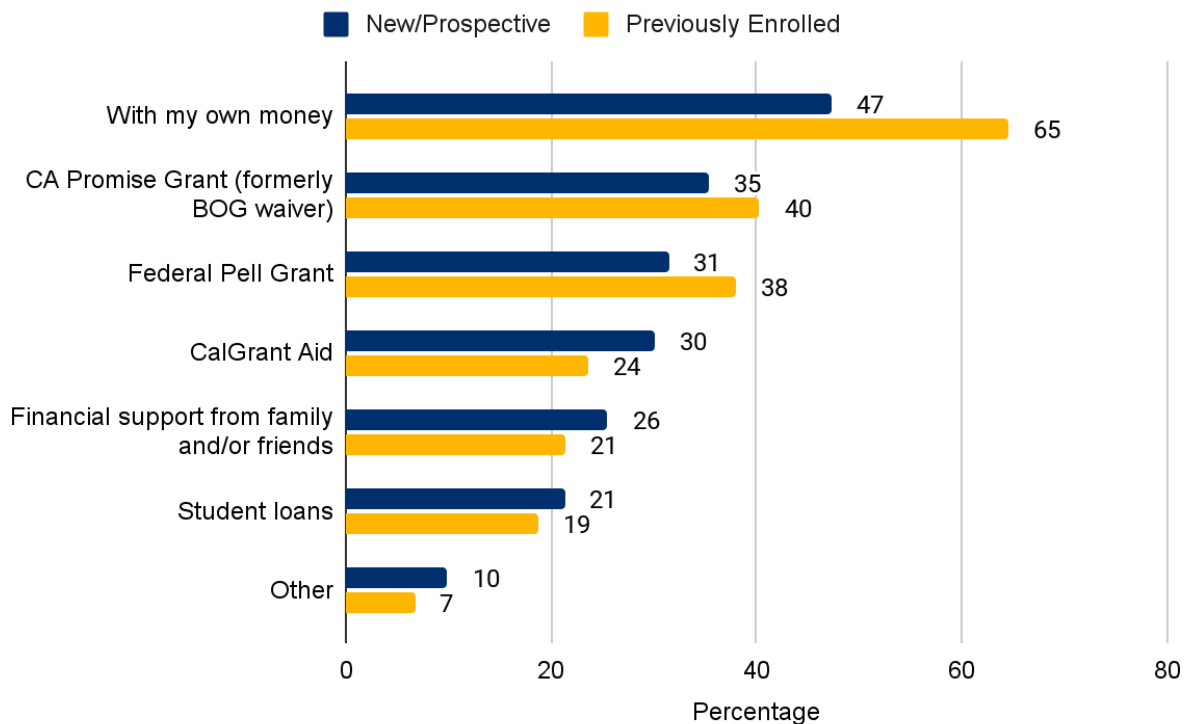


Note: Respondents were able to check more than one reason.

When asked how respondents were planning to or have paid for college, the top source selected was their own money overall, with a larger proportion of previously enrolled students than new/prospective students indicating so (65% vs. 47%) (see Figure 7). A greater proportion of previously enrolled students marked Promise and Federal Pell Aid as sources than new/prospective students, but a greater proportion of new/prospective students than previously enrolled students marked Cal Grant as a source.

³ 388 new/prospective students and 621 previously enrolled students

Figure 7. Sources Respondents Have Used or Plan to Use to Pay for College

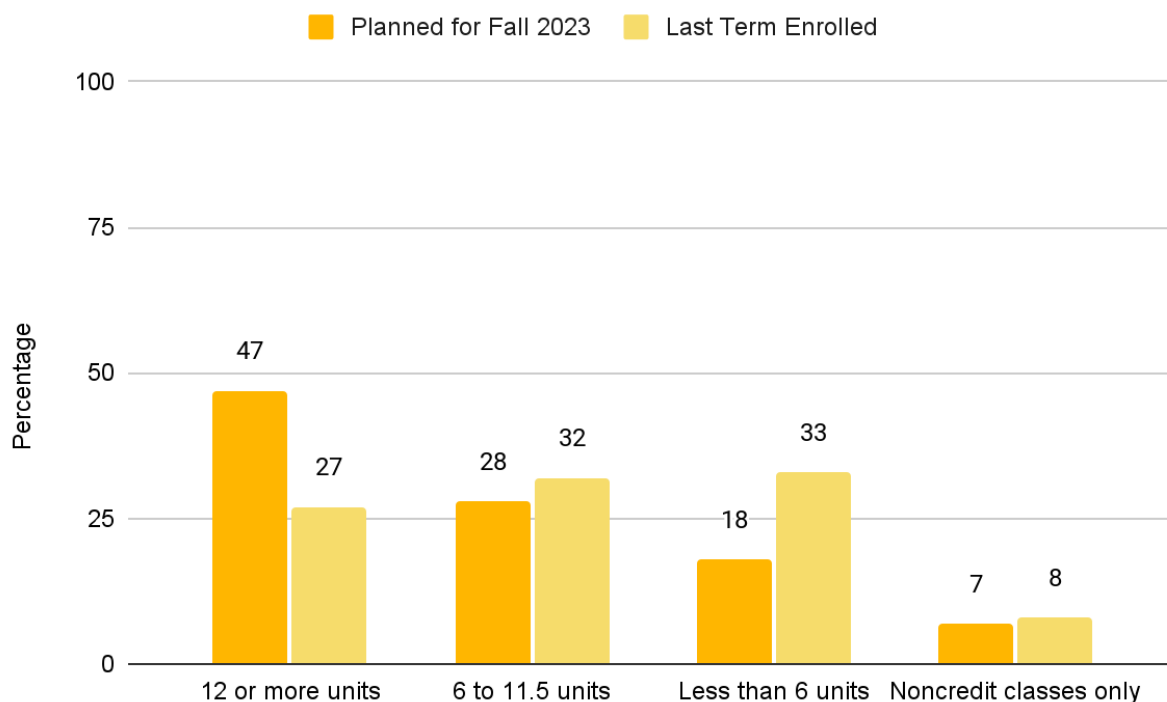


Note: Respondents were able to check more than one reason.

Previously Enrolled Students' Prior Enrollment History

Two items asked how many units previously enrolled students planned to enroll in the fall of 2023 and in how many units they had enrolled the last time they were enrolled. Results revealed that nearly double the proportion of students planned to take 12 or more units in the fall of 2023 relative to what they actually took in the last term they enrolled in (47% vs. 27%, respectively, see Figure 8).

Figure 8. Unit Load Comparison Among Previously Enrolled Students: Planned for Fall 2023 vs. Last Term Enrolled



Among previously enrolled students, one in five reported dropping or withdrawing or considering dropping or withdrawing from at least one course in their last term (Figure 9). The most common reasons students gave for dropping or withdrawing were:

- Needing to prioritize their mental health (35%)
- Needing to prioritize work (31%)
- Not being able to keep up with the pace of classes (27%)

These findings reflect the growing demands students have to juggle their external environments (e.g., school, work, personal lives) and their mental and psychological well-being. Personal circumstances, family responsibilities, and childcare were frequently cited factors affecting students' ability to stay in class. Students also reported mental health struggles that led to additional stress, anxiety, and a lack of motivation or interest in their courses. Some of these struggles were spurred by major life changes such as becoming a parent, navigating a career change, or experiencing death/illness in their family. Time management, workload, and class demands and/or pace were also mentioned as challenges. Students reported feeling overwhelmed and experiencing difficulty keeping up with their classes. In the words of four new/prospective students:

I had too much on my plate at the time taking 3 other classes & working full time. Also being a single parent can be a lot within itself, so there were times I felt like I had too much going on that I could not balance, so I had to drop one class to reduce some stress & the workload for me.

I felt too overwhelmed and couldn't catch up on homework. Between my other classes and work and my poor mental health, I couldn't handle the workload.

My mental health was declining rapidly and I couldn't keep up with my classes anymore, so I dropped one of them.

Balancing my mental and physical health with work and school and my social life seems like a feat for someone who is simply not me.

Figure 9. Top Reasons Previously Enrolled Students Dropped Class(es)



Note: Respondents were able to check more than one reason.

Students working and/or caring for dependents seek greater flexibility in instructional formats and course scheduling options. Students seek more flexible class structures, such as shorter course durations or alternative modalities, to accommodate their work schedules and family responsibilities. In the words of two previously enrolled students and one new/prospective student:

It's difficult to balance work, home life with multiple dependents and school on campus. Online classes are a lot easier to fit into my type of schedule.

Being a single mother and the sole provider doesn't leave much time available. If more online classes were available that would be a great help.

I believe the main factor would be my ability to balance the workload. I would need to do online classes but I learn better in a classroom. I have two young children and a small business that I depend on for income.

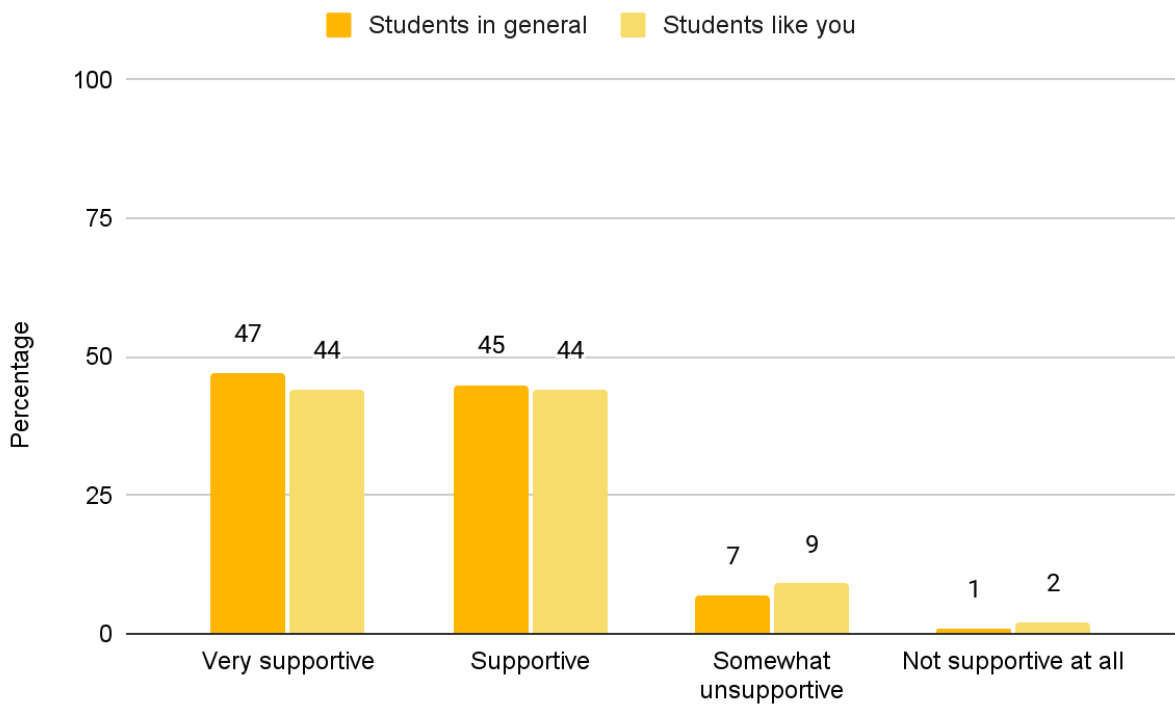
Despite facing numerous challenges, many students expressed a strong determination to attend college, citing personal growth, career advancement, and the security of having a college degree as their primary motivations.

Section 4: Other Factors Affecting Enrollment Decisions

Perceptions of Campus Climate

Previously enrolled students were asked two questions about their perceptions of the campus climate. Most survey respondents who previously enrolled in a California community college reported that the campus climate was generally supportive and was supportive of students similar to them (Figure 10).

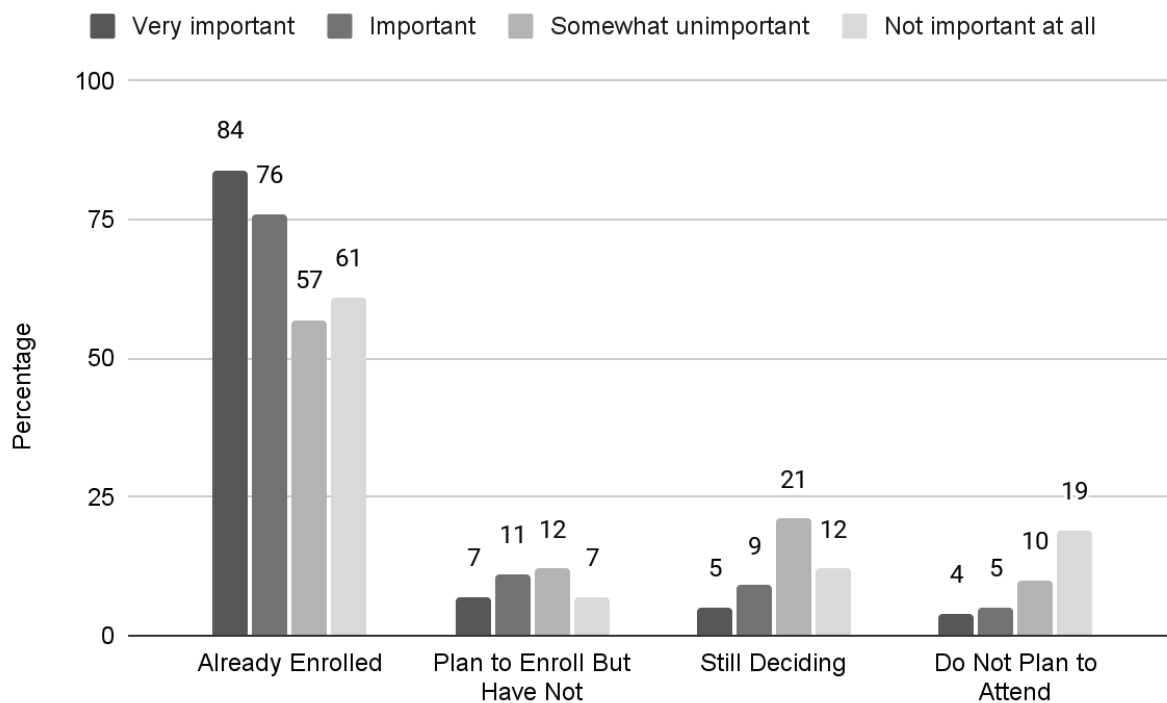
Figure 10. Campus Climate: How supportive is the campus climate at your college?



Perceived Value of a College Education

An examination of students’ perceived value of education disaggregated by fall 2023 enrollment plans found a somewhat inverse relationship between their reported level of importance and their fall enrollment plans (Figure 11). In other words, students who placed a higher value on education were more likely to enroll or plan to enroll for fall 2023, as opposed to students not planning to enroll who were more likely to place a lower value on education.

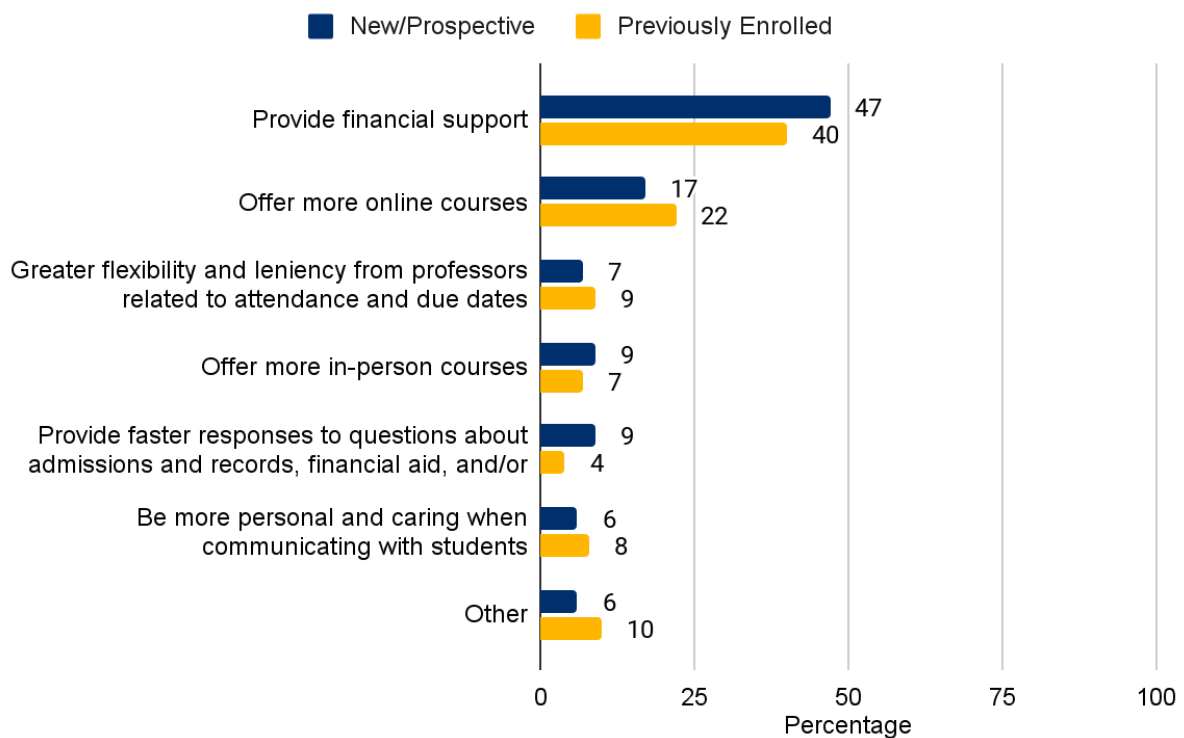
Figure 11. Value of Education by Fall 2023 Enrollment Plans



Section 5: What Students Say They Need From Their Colleges

When asked what they needed from their colleges to stay enrolled or start attending college, the top three requests from students were: 1) financial assistance, 2) more online classes, and 3) greater flexibility from professors. The most frequently cited need across all students was for colleges to provide more financial assistance and support (47% of new/prospective and 40% of previously enrolled, see Figure 12).

Figure 12. Ways the College Could Help Students Attend/Enroll in College



Note: Respondents were able to check more than one option.

Students indicated they are looking to colleges for help in lowering the cost of attendance, which includes reducing college fees, offering affordable or free textbooks, and providing more guidance on the types of aid available and how students can qualify. Additionally, students reported needing financial assistance to cover living expenses and childcare costs to meet their basic needs while working towards their educational goals.

While some students reported that they hope colleges increase face-to-face offerings, a greater percentage of students indicated they would like more online courses to be available. Approximately 22% of previously enrolled students and 17% of new/prospective students desired more online classes. Students reported that learning in a virtual environment allows them to care for children/dependents and maintain their work schedules, which can be challenging with face-to-face instruction.

During the pandemic, many professors relaxed their attendance and grading policies, recognizing students were under an unusual amount of pressure as they faced numerous personal and professional challenges while navigating the transition to remote instruction. About 7% of new/prospective students and 9% of previously enrolled students reported they still need that same level of flexibility and leniency when it comes to attendance and due dates.

Forty percent of students who completed the survey indicated they wanted to be contacted by the college. During the time when the survey was open (August through October 2023), colleges were provided real-time access to their students' survey data to assist with strategic enrollment management efforts, examine local trends, and reach out to students who had questions or needed support.

Conclusions and Opportunities

Results from the 2023 survey revealed similar findings from the survey administered in 2022 in terms of what influences their decisions to attend college and/or stay enrolled in their classes:

- the need to balance and juggle multiple responsibilities
- mental health factors
- the cost of education

Nearly half of students who indicated they did not think they could afford college shared that they were planning to have paid for college via their own money. When digging deeper into these factors with a new set of questions, the types of costs most concerning to students were college tuition, fees, and associated expenses related to books and supplies.

Based on these findings, we reiterate the three areas of opportunities identified in the 2022 survey:

- **Re-emphasize the value proposition for college more explicitly,**
- **Increase student-centered course and student support services schedules and modalities, and**
- **Raise awareness and increase the utilization of state investments to support students' learning and basic needs.**

To highlight the need to further focus on college affordability, we add the following new opportunity:

- **Expand communication and assistance campaigns about the different types of financial**
 - Examples include:
 - The California Student Aid Commission (CSAC) proposed a *student-centered framework for Cal Grant* as a way to increase awareness and uptake of Cal Grant funding for eligible students.⁴ This expansion is expected to increase the number of awards each year for each type of aid by at least 50%. Moreover, this aid will be in addition to any federal aid students qualify for.
 - *Assembly Bill (AB) 607: Public Postsecondary Education Course Materials* will require institutions to clearly mark sections that have zero or low-cost instructional materials in the schedule of classes.
 - *Zero-Textbook Degree Cost* is one-time funding from the state to invest in the creation of degree pathways uses open educational resources as a strategy for reducing the cost of obtaining a degree.

While these and similar efforts are directly addressing college affordability in different ways, it will be incumbent upon the colleges to ensure that faculty, staff, and students are aware of these efforts to help raise awareness and, more importantly, access to these resources and services to help make college more affordable for students.

⁴ [Cal Grant Modernization: A vision for the future, March 2020](#)

Appendix A: Survey Design and Methods

This study used a cross-sectional survey to explore the factors affecting prospective and previously enrolled community college students' decisions whether to attend a California community college in fall 2023. The online survey was codesigned by staff from the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office (CCCCO) and the Research and Planning Group for California Community Colleges (The RP Group), and a professor in education at the University of California, Davis, who specializes in postsecondary and workforce transitions (see Appendix B for survey instrument). The 42-item survey included a mix of fixed-choice and open-ended items to understand what influenced students' decisions whether to enroll or re-enroll (for previously enrolled students) and what they needed to attend college.

The survey link was sent to all 116 California community colleges via contacts in each college's institutional research office. Each college was asked to send the initial invitation to complete the survey, along with at least two reminders. Responses from this survey were collected between August 29, 2023 and October 17, 2023. Two hundred and fifty gift cards from Starbucks, American Express, and Amazon ranging in denomination from \$5 to \$100 were offered as an incentive to students to complete the survey and were awarded via a random drawing.

Sample

Convenience and purposive sampling methods were used to collect responses from students who had an enrollment record at any community college as of spring 2023 (previously enrolled students) or who had applied to any community college through summer 2023. There were 29,463 responses from students across 117 institutions in this study, including all 115 community colleges and two continuing education institutions.

The raw survey results included 38,888 cases examined and cleaned to eliminate incomplete or anomalous data. See the codebook for definitions and data types for all variables in the survey. The data were sorted and examined for duplicates by matching respondent information (e.g., student name and email address). If duplicates were identified, the first completed response was used in the analysis.

Appendix B: [Statewide California Community College Attendance Survey](#)

Appendix C: [Technical Tables](#)

The Research and Planning Group for California Community Colleges (The RP Group)

As the representative organization for Institutional Research, Planning, and Effectiveness (IRPE) professionals in the California Community Colleges (CCC) system, The RP Group strengthens the ability of CCC to discover and undertake high-quality research, planning, and assessments that improve evidence-based decision-making, institutional effectiveness, and success for all students.

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- Michael Large at Palomar College
- Student Senate for California Community Colleges
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Most importantly, we thank the CCC students for openly sharing their experiences with us.